

# Hamlet (shakespeare): "mad," "sane," or "none of the above"?

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



A form of theatrical representation, metadrama (Danner), revealed Hamlet's convictions about the behaviors and character of his mother, father, step-father, and, most importantly, himself (Shakespeare). Metadramatic techniques reveal to the audience that characters in a play themselves are aware they are in a play and are providing additional information that the audience can accept as truthful (Danner).

While these characters have no motivation to be deceitful, they may demonstrate to the audience their ability to deceive themselves. Most notably, in Hamlet, the audience can accept information in particular soliloquies, the play-within-a-play, and from the ghost of Hamlet's father as accurate representations of Hamlet's and even the ghost's own perceptions.

Why would any self-respecting ghost return to earth other than to reveal the truth? And why would Hamlet choose to lie to us through a soliloquy?

However, most importantly, we have an opportunity to witness Hamlet's own unintentional self-deceptions. In using examples of these techniques to evaluate Hamlet's mental condition, "sanity" was not conceptualized as a categorical variable with two levels, "sane" or "mad."

"Creating "madness" in a fictional character in a literary masterpiece (e. g., Ophelia in Hamlet) does not impose the difficulties encountered when trying to differentiate between those who are legally "mad" vs. "bad" (Emery & Oltmanns 429-433) or when trying to form two discrete diagnostic categories (Emery & Oltmanns 3-14).

Regarding the question of whether Hamlet was “ mad” or “ sane,” in the analysis presented below, he has been conceptualized as unfortunate in having characteristics that did not match the particular demands needed for the unusual circumstances of his life and also in having the facility for self-deception that prevented him from recognizing the futility of nonetheless persevering.

At the beginning of the play, Hamlet was a young man grieving following the death of the father he apparently still had worshipped as young boys not infrequently do, until they learn what is and isn't “ cool”. Hamlet, of course, seemingly for worse rather than for better, actually had that all-powerful father, strong, courageous, respected and also loved by all. Not prepared for his father's death, Hamlet was even less prepared for his mother's fast re-marriage to her brother-in-law.

Magnificent poetry is no less magnificent if it comes from the mouth of someone too inexperienced to have learned the difference between the kinds of painful events that characterize human existence and those that will always get our own or most anyone's attention, for example, the difference between our recently widowed mother having sex with the village idiot and her being sent to Hitler's gas chambers. The intensity and obsessive nature of his suicidal depression alone would have permitted a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD;

American Psychiatric Association manual, as cited in Emery & Oltmanns): “  
O, that this too too solid flesh would Melt{,} and resolve itself into a dew! Or that he Everlasting had not fix'd His cannon ' gainst self-slaughter! O God!

God! How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable, Seem to me all the uses of this world!" (Hamlet 10).

Interestingly, more than two centuries before Freud's birth, Shakespeare had dramatized the kind of observation on which the latter based psychoanalytic theory (as cited in Shaffer). First, in the soliloquy cited above, Hamlet did not yet even know that the cause of his father's death was homicide and would not himself have recognized that his suicidal depression was caused not by his father's death but by his mother's sexual betrayal (in Hamlet's view) of his father, when she went with "most wicked speed, to post With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!" (10).

Without apology for violating one of the many dictates of the politically correct (PC), the dictate never to mention the name "Freud" without including the phrase "sexist" (Bowers & Farvolden), it does not even seem possible to avoid imagining Dr. Freud, while rubbing his whiskers thoughtfully, concluding that while Hamlet had resolved his fear of paternal retribution for his Oedipal desires by closely identifying with his father, his resolution of the Oedipal stage was incomplete because, regarding his mother, in wording compatible with Hamlet's revered Bible, he still was "lusting in his heart" and, rather than blame his mother as an individual, he instead (innocently and blissfully untroubled today's PC) blamed women's nature, "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (10).

His ambiguous view of his mother was perhaps not unlike children who blame their mothers for all that is wrong with their lives and the world, yet for whom the phrase "your mother," in themselves, are fighting words. To

reinforce the doubts he already had about Gertrude (noted above), Shakespeare gave him the ghost of his father who simultaneously condemned and forgave her, in effect setting her up as a target for both justifiable rage and self-restraint:

Claudius “ won to his shameful lust The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen” (20) and Hamlet should “ Let not the royal bed of Denmark be A couch for luxury and damned incest. But, however, thou pursuest this act, Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive Against thy mother...” (21). The ghost of Hamlet’s father encouraged what already was his simmering attribution of blame, not overly concerned about the fairness of Gertrude sharing Claudius’ guilt. In fact, we know that people distort their own perceptions and memories in a direction consistent with their beliefs (Schacter), explaining how Hamlet managed to interpret the ghost’s condemnation of Gertrude as strong enough to warrant his own conclusion, “ O most pernicious woman!” (22).

Indeed, people who have suffered misfortune frequently do seek out other people to blame. We do not like to believe we are at the mercy of random inexplicable accidents or that there is no meaning to account for the occurrence of adverse events or that we do not have immortal souls. Thus, while Claudius most certainly was guilty of committing “ murder most foul” (20), what did Gertrude actually do to warrant her son’s animosity? When does she ever show us the loathsome side of herself we have come to expect?

Regarding her husband, she, in fact, does not seem guilty of anything more than being naively trusting, when as a recent and lonely widow, she was human in being receptive to the sexual overtures of a man she believed shared her own grief. Despite what her son and her husband's ghost indignantly protested, for centuries, marriage between even blood relatives might be considered a national European sport (Coontz).

Regarding Hamlet, her "crimes" seemed no more than being overly tolerant of his disrespectful treatment and overly supportive to the extent of being his cheerleader in what she failed to recognize was not a game but a lethal battle with Laertes: "He's fat, and scant of breath. Here Hamlet, take my napkin, rub thy brows; the queen carouses to thy fortune" (Hamlet, 99). In her exuberance, she drank poison from the cup her husband had prepared for Hamlet.

It would seem that Hamlet's fatal flaw was less his inability to exact revenge from Claudius than his facility at finding and deceiving himself into believing about any possible excuse, thus preventing him from accepting himself for not being the "man of action" expected of the son of a great king. Under other circumstances, differing from his father regarding physical accomplishments might have led to no more than the timeless struggle between, for example, the father who had been star quarterback in high school and the son who was in his father's eyes the star high-school nerd.

It was Hamlet's incredible myopia regarding the excuses he was making for failing to act that led inexorably to a tragic bloodbath in the end. Hamlet, it turned out, like J. Alfred Prufrock, was "not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to

be" (Eliot line 111). Had Hamlet a chance to "grow old" (line 120), he might have recognized his own nature in time to avoid becoming "an attendant lord...deferential, glad to be of use" (lines 112, 115).

However, he too had "wept and prayed" (line 81) and rather than finding "the strength and courage to force the moment to a crisis" (line 80), he found only excuses for failing to act. Indeed, Hamlet seemed to sincerely believe he would have been able to end his torment through suicide had his religion not prohibited "self-slaughter" (Hamlet, 10).

These excuses included an odd need for evidence that the ghost was truthful (53), failing to act after the play-within-a-play elicited the demonstration of guilt Hamlet sought from Claudius (surprisingly, since the sociopath of Hamlet's description would not be likely to even feel guilt - and after a stunningly convincing description of his own conscience, why did Claudius not remember this conscience after again Hamlet failed to kill him?) because of his mistaken perception of Claudius being in the act of prayer. Ironically, as Claudius was acknowledging that his "offense is rank it smells to heaven; It hath the primal eldest curse upon't, A brother's murder.

Pray can I not" (64), Hamlet, echoing the ghost of his father at the beginning of the play, could not kill Claudius because if killed while in prayer, "he goes to heaven ... this is ... not revenge" (65). At this point, he failed even to question the justice of a religion that rewards a minute of remorse with heaven and punishes anyone unfortunate enough to die suddenly with hell. Hamlet never did describe what his father might have done so that he was "cut off even in the blossom of my sins" (21).

Was Hamlet “ mad”? He was not mad unless the label is consistently used to describe anyone demonstrating self-destructive patterns of thought. For that matter, if we describe Hamlet as “ mad,” there would be no reason for excluding the millions of people who fit, to varying degrees, even one diagnostic description in the American Psychiatric Association manual (as cited in Emery & Oltmanns).

Is Hamlet “ sane”? The label again would fit only if it also were used to describe virtually all of us who demonstrate any of the subjective feelings of distress described in the same manual. The text of Hamlet did not even provide enough information to form a reliable conclusion about his thoughts and behaviors prior to his father’s death. He might have been feeling distressed his entire life because of experiences such as the death of his pet flea or a stubbed toe.

The genuine tragedy of Hamlet was that the eloquence and stunningly brutal clarity with which he expressed the universal human condition in his most famous soliloquy did not prevent his doom and, indeed, might have been so brilliant that he would have been blinded had he not turned away: a condition where the only escape from “ the whips and scorns of time” is into the potentially worse “ undiscover’d country ... [that] makes us rather bear those ills we have Than fly to others that we know not of” (48).

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